

IDOLS

By Walter Conrad Arensberg

THE NEW POETRY SERIES



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

Boston and New York

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SOME IMAGIST POETS.

JAPANESE LYRICS. Translated by LAFCADIO
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THE CLOISTER: A VERSE DRAMA. EMILE VER-
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STILLWATER PASTORALS AND OTHER POEMS.
PAUL SHIVELL.

IDOLS. WALTER CONRAD ARENSBERG.

URNS AND MOVIES, AND OTHER TALES IN
VERSE. CONRAD AIKEN.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON AND NEW YORK

IDOLS

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BY

WALTER CONRAD ARENSBERG



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

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FOR LOU

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CLOUDS

I D O L S

CLOUDS

FOR FORMS THAT ARE FREE

Loosen the web, Arachne, and we will waltz.
Loosen, Arachne,
The spider-web that has ensnared
The feet in such a struggling bergamask.

VOYAGE À L'INFINI

THE swan existing
Is like a song with an accompaniment
Imaginary.

Across the glassy lake,
Across the lake to the shadow of the willows,
It is accompanied by an image,
— As by Debussy's
“ Reflets dans l'eau.”

The swan that is
Reflects
Upon the solitary water — breast to breast
With the duplicity:
“ The other one ! ”

And breast to breast it is confused.
O visionary wedding! O stateliness of the procession!
It is accompanied by the image of itself
Alone.

At night
The lake is a wide silence,
Without imagination.

DIRGE

MAKE of the moon a motion,
You
Who are laid to rest,
Make of the moon about the eaves of space,
You who upon the earth
Are doing nothing,
The circles of the swallow
In the twilight,
You who have left above the empty house
The night
In suspense.

THE VOICE OF ONE DEAD

OF the relented limbs and the braid, O lady,
Bound up in haste at parting,
The secret is kept.

JUNE

THESE breaking buds,
These buds in a nest of leaves . . .

What wings have covered them,
And the warmth of what brooding mother,
That the roses,
The roses themselves,
Come out?

The roses are trying their petals . . .
Fly away, roses, after the wind.

TO THE GATHERER

HEAVY with the life among the leaves
The bough
Is heavy with your hands . . .
It yields.
And will the yielding bough at the last
Break ?
Or at the last made light
By hands that gather and cannot hold,
Will it swing away as it used to swing,
Out of the reach of hands,
High with one apple ?

AT DAYBREAK

I HAD a dream and I awoke with it,
Poor little thing that I had not unclasped
After the kiss good-bye.

And at the surface how it gasped,
This thing that I had loved in the unlit
Depth of the drowsy sea . . .
Ah me,
This thing with which I drifted toward the sky.

Driftwood upon a wave,
Senseless the motion that it gave.

AUTOBIOGRAPHIC

PERMANENTLY in a space that is anywhere here
While I am I,
I am temporarily
Always now.

And at the eternal
Instant
I look —
The eye-glassed I
At the not I, the opaque
Others,
Eye-glassed too.
And I who see of them
Only the glasses
Looking,
See of myself
In looking-glasses
Faces
Distorted.

And throughout the transparent
Spaciousness,
Which is so extensively
The present
Point
Located personally —
A solid geometry
Of vacancy
Bounded by the infinite
Absence,
I
Foreshorten
To the end
Of me . . .
Walls and ceilings
Of my cellular
Isolation
Wrecked by perspective,
Habitable cubes
Of static
Surfaces of plaster
Prolonged in flight.
And it is I who hold them back,
And it is I who let them go,
These gray planes plunging

In an emptiness
Blue,
These rampant sides of pyramids
That converge
To nothing

While I am I.

STATUES

THE NIGHT OF ARIADNE

SHE waited in a grotto by the sea
The vital visit of the Minotaur
Untouched. The night had grown oracular
With tongues of licking heat that were not he,
She knew not how she knew, reluctantly.
The entrance of the grotto was a scar
Of heaven, and in it lengthened, star by star,
Stalactites to her credulous chastity.

Heavy the darkness that she lay beneath ;
The tide was swelling ; and a rosy wreath
She vowed to an old pagan monolith,
Her god, if it would send against the myth
A man. . . . And in a dream she seemed to sheath
The dripping blade that he would enter with.

HUMAN

IN a cathedral that aspires in thought
I am . . . and I perhaps am not alone!
I am an altar to a God unknown,
And with the candles I am clear and hot.
And if He cannot be it matters not;
A reaper of the whirlwind who have sown,
I think a God and so I am my own;
And toward myself so long in me forgot

I take the ancient attitude of prayer,
Yes, even as by the crib, beneath the flame
Of the familiar face . . . Or was it where
I thought of one too strange who never came,
And closed my empty arms about the air,
Feeling the nakedness of her first name.

THE DIVINE COMEDY

AND if it was a dream it was enough —
It lasted like a world, it kept awake
The ghost of Beatrice ; and to that break
Of day which brake at last the dreamy stuff,
Breaking to death the forest wild and rough,
It lit the night, and by the troubled lake
It spake as with her voice that never spake :
“ *O peace, be still !* ” to all the winds thereof.

The comedy of Dante Alighieri !
For dreams he left his birthright of despair,
The lives that stiffened into statuary
In the cathedral of his proud poor prayer.
For him the bride beside the mother Mary
Let down the heavenly ladders of her hair.

AU QUATRIÈME: RUE DES ÉCOLES

I HAVE a memory of a lonely room . . .
The walls of it were as a garden wall.
O gardens of the world, O lost perfume !
Outside the world I read the *Fleurs du Mal*.
Ah me, I seemed to understand it all,
Till in the door I saw I know not whom.
She said: "What are the flowers that you let fall?"
She seemed to say: "It's I, it's I who bloom."

Was I at last afraid to be alone?
"Who are you, woman whom I have not known?"
I asked, and as she gazed: "Are you a child?"
Gravely she gave her lips and she was gone . . .
Gone with her wistful answer which she smiled:
"I am the deepest valley to the dawn."

LANDSCAPE AND FIGURES

THE twilight is returning — come away!
It gropes among the trees, it is confused
About the golden bodies that we used
In earnest and a little while in play.
The twilight that has yielded up its day
Clings to us now like some poor thing seduced
Who on the hilly bosoms has unloosed
The long disheveled sunlight growing gray.

Hide from the haggard touches of the sun
Your yielding body, that it may be one
With all the dark ; and for the breathless bed
Gather the quiet that the Lyra shed,
When for the tryst supreme that no one knows
The night had the consent of a pale rose.

DIALOGUE

Be patient, Life, when Love is at the gate,
And when he enters let him be at home.
Think of the roads that he has had to roam.
Think of the years that he has had to wait.

*But if I let Love in I shall be late.
Another has come first — there is no room.
And I am thoughtful of the endless loom —
Let Love be patient, the importunate.*

O Life, be idle and let Love come in,
And give thy dreamy hair that Love may spin.

*But Love himself is idle with his song.
Let Love come last, and then may Love last long.*

Be patient, Life, for Love is not the last.
Be patient now with Death, for Love has passed.

TO A DESERTED TEMPLE AT PÆSTUM

Is it a hushed good morrow to the sea
Or a good night, if night shall be for good,
That thou art holding in thine attitude,
O faithful Grecian fane in Italy?
Wrecked is the god who went away from thee;
Thou takest the shadows for thy widowhood;
Thou hast not fallen when the winds have wooed;
Thou art the patience of Penelope.

So dost thou hold the attitude of Greece
Toward one who wanders now the wood obscure.
Yea, though the moss be thine entablature,
The stars at last thine only mysteries,
Amid the winds that will not let thee be
Thou art a gesture of eternity.

CRYSTALS

PORTRAIT

SHE has a gas-lit glitter of cold stones,
She lives, and she makes light of lingerie;
And she has suffered not the little ones
To come to her, suffering you and me.

The flesh is pretty about the gentle bones,
And these at least — you feel! — have modesty,
These of her naked life the last Unknowns
That she's afraid as death to let you see.

JOHN DAVIDSON

O NOT for him the shore crepuscular,
The waning house, the slow obscurity;
For him the sudden setting of a star . . .
He has gone out like light upon the sea.

His are the rights of memory in all lands;
A lord of life too haughty for a crown
Laid on with hands of God, with his own hands
He laid it on his head and laid it down.

TO HASEKAWA

PERHAPS it is no matter that you died ;
Life 's an *incognito* which you saw through.
You never told on life — you had your pride ;
But life has told on you.

SONG OF THE SOULS SET FREE

WRAP the earth in cloudy weather
For a shroud.

We have slipped the earthly tether,
We're above the cloud.

Peep and draw the cloud together,
Peep upon the bowed.

What can they be bowing under,
Wild and wan?

Peep, and draw the cloud asunder,
Peep, and wave a dawn.

It will make them rise and wonder
Whether we are gone.

AN OLD GAME

Is it heavenly *hide and seek*,
Playmate, that you have to play?
When I closed my eyes to pray
You were breathless where you lay
On the bed, and you were weak.
When I opened them at length
It was you who had the strength,
You the earthly runaway.

Is it *Seek and ye shall find*
On the way that you have run,
Playmate, past the setting sun?
Or does pale Oblivion
Say her gentle *Never mind?*
Through the emptiness of sky
If I call no glad *I spy*,
Will you care, O hidden one?

AFTER-THOUGHT

O WHAT can I be breathing for,
Wasting the world by being sad?
O for a breath of life! Once more
My life is willing to be glad.

Even her grave is growing glad
With grass and with the flowering suns;
Nor in the grave can she be sad
To miss the waking clarions.

She'll not be sad if I forget —
Hers is the way of being glad.
Of her I need not think. And yet . . .
It is not I, the world is sad.

FALLING ASLEEP

O THE dream that dandles
Sleepy Head !

*Lay aside your sandals
That have fled
Down a night of candles
By the bed.*

O the changing pillow
That is bare !

*Be a weeping willow
With your hair
Long . . . And on your billow
Lift me . . . where ?*

CONSIDER THE LILIES

LILIES are the beckonings
Of a world of lilies fallen,
Yielding to alighted wings
Secret pollen.

Yesterdays are ghostly sheaves,
Noon is golden on the bough.
Life is ripe among the leaves . . .
Beckon thou.

Wave a handkerchief of prayer,
Keep a secret in a gown.
When the wings are in the air,
Bow down.

TO A POET

WHAT are you doing like a naughty child
To the original NON-ENTITY,
Without a wedding and a little wild,
Those moments when you say of beauty : “ BE ”?

TO A GARDEN IN APRIL

ALAS, and are you pleading now for pardon?
Spring came by night — and so there is no telling?
Spring had his way with you, my little garden . . .
You hide in leaf, but oh ! your buds are swelling.

THE INNER SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STATUES
SEATED OUTSIDE THE BOSTON PUBLIC
LIBRARY

How natural the way that they have greeted
Each other, like two girls excused at school :

*“ Sister of bronze upon the granite seated,
Hast thou an easy stool ? ”*

A DYING SERVANT

AT last there was to be a time of rest,
Even before she died, the very best
Time that at last was to be all her own,
When she should not be holding back a groan
Just for the sake of some one else, and when
Among the ladies and the gentlemen,
At last being out of pain, she should not run
Back to the duty that was left undone.
She was left to herself. The old alarm
Clock had run down for good, and the lukewarm
Hot water bottles that were lying where
They lay all day no longer mattered—her
Cold feet did not feel cold or anything.
But there was something of the evening
Which she had now the time to feel. It smiled
Upon her idleness, and like a child
She said a “*Now I lay me down to sleep.*”
Left to herself, what had she left to keep
Of her spent self except a final tryst
For dreams, where even she might yet be kissed.

So when at last the mistress came and lay
A hand upon her brow to ease away
The difficult life, the servant, who in duty
Without complaint had found her only beauty,
Complained about that hand upon her brow :
“ Don't bother me — it is all over now.”

· FOR THE SAKE OF PEACE

TO THE NECROPHILE

After reading of the affectionate desire of Germany "to get closer to France," as expressed by the German Secretary of State to the British Ambassador at Berlin.

WITH love are you gone mad, O lover of France,
That you should be embracing with your arms
Her gory body for the gore that warms
Only a monster in his dalliance?
Alas! she is alive with her alarms,
Unwilling yet for the enraged romance.
Assault her sacredness of Paris, lance
Her flank with such a wound as has its charms

For you who want for your obscene amours
The body of a soul that is not yours,
For you who want a wound to enter by,
For you who want a corpse upon your heart.
Coupling with France if France would only die,
Not yours the human vow: "TILL DEATH US PART!"

AM TAG!

WILLIAM of Germany, is this the day
For which you have been drinking—or a night
Which is awakened by the dynamite
Clearing the darkness in your drunken way?
The deeds of darkness are not yours—you light
Louvains about the beds of children. Yea,
And in the churches where the women pray
For some conception of the divine right,

Them you enlighten, too—the right divine
Is yours! And from a heaven above the Rhine
Your visitation! And immaculate
Is the conception as the women wait,
Beneath the dove-like wings of aeroplanes,
The pleasure that you feel in their remains.

INFINITE MERCY

CAN He who heard the plea for ignorance :

“Forgive them, for they know not what they do !”

Stooping to the uplifted cross of France,

Forgive the Germans — they who know and
knew ?

TO LOUVAIN

OLD city that ascended in a cloud,
You dropped the ashes which the earth is proud
To wear for you while all the mouths of Krupp
Are mocking still: "*Go up, bald head, go up!*"

THE WAR LORD

"My heart bleeds for Louvain."

WHOM the lord loves he chastens. And he bleeds
That you, Louvain, are burning in his hell.
And there is not a Christ that intercedes.
The lord is in his heaven. All is well.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE SUBMARINE THAT
SANK THE LUSITANIA

RISE to an infamy, take a breath and dive,
And to the children drowning in the sea
Prove that there is a way to keep alive
Beneath the level of humanity.

TO BELGIUM

LIFEWARD at last, some day,
When no one shall be left to say Alas,
Children shall follow along the trodden way
The lure of the reviving grass.

NEUTRALITY

Nor by a dirge or a pæan
Breathe of the wrongs of France!
Watch, Laodicean,
And wait upon the chance.

The game is for the great —
And whose the sacrifice?
Laodicean, wait
And watch the loaded dice!

TRANSLATIONS

THE AFTERNOON OF A FAUN

ECLOGUE BY MALLARMÉ

THE FAUN¹

THOSE nymphs, I would perpetuate them.

Even so clear
Their coloring light, it dances in the atmosphere
Heavy with leafy sleeps.

Was it a dream I loved?

My doubt, a mass of night primeval, is removed
In many a subtle branch which proves, being still these
very

Woods, that, alas, I gave myself all solitary
For triumph the default ideal of the rose.
Let us reflect

if women of whom thou thus dost gloze
Image a longing of thy senses fanciful!
Faun, the illusion is escaping from the cool
Blue eyes, even as a spring in tears, of the more chaste:
The other, though, all sighs, thou sayest is to contrast
Even as a daytime zephyr warm upon thy fleece!
Not so! through the exhausted swoon and motionless

¹ See the note on page 78.

Stifling with heats the morning fresh if it rebels,
Murmurs that water only which my flute expels
On the grove sprayed with notes; and the one breath
of air

Out of the two pipes prompt in its exhaling ere
It scatters all around the sound in a dry sprinkle,
Is, over the horizon that has not one wrinkle,
The visible and tranquil breath illusory
Of inspiration, which once more attains the sky.

O ye Sicilian borders of a quiet swamp
Which, to the sun's despite, is plundered by my pomp,
Tacit beneath the flowers of sparkles, CELEBRATE
*"How I cut here the hollow rushes subjugate
By skill; when on the glaucous gold of verdurings
Remote which dedicate their vine unto the springs,
Billows a whiteness animal in the repose:
And how in the preluding slow where the pipe grows,
That flight of swans, ah no! of naiads springs away
Or dives . . ."*

Inert, all is afire in tawny day,
Not showing by what art dashed off in company
Too much of hymen wished by one who strikes the
key:

Then shall I waken to the primal zeal, upright
And solitary in a flood antique of light,
Lilies! and of you all the one for artlessness.

Other than that soft nothing which their lips express,
The kiss, which keeps the faithless safe by its low
 sound,

My breast, virgin of proof, bears witness to a wound
Mysterious, occasioned by some august tooth;
But hush! there needs for confidant of such a truth
The large and double reed performed upon by day:
Which, as it sucks the trouble of the cheek away,
Dreams, in a long extended solo, of amusing
The beauty of the neighbourhood by a confusing
False of that beauty and our song infatuated;
And that as high as love itself is modulated
It may make vanish from the common dream of thighs
Immaculate or backs pursued by my closed eyes,
A loud and ineffectual monotonous line.

Try then to flower again, pipe of the flights, malign
Syrinx, upon the lakes where thou for me must wait!
I, of my rumor proud, will at great length relate
Of goddesses, and by idolatrous imagery
Remove the girdles yet from their obscurity:

Just so, when from the grapes I have sucked out the
lustre,
Laughter, I lift to summer skies the empty cluster
To banish a regret by trickery dispersed,
And blowing into the translucent skins, athirst
For drunkenness, until the evening I look through.

O nymphs, let us inflate some MEMORIES new.
*"My eye, piercing the reeds, transfixes each heavenly
Neck, which beneath the river drowns its ardency
With cries of anger to the heaven of the wood;
And the resplendent bath of tresses is bestrewed
In glitterings and quiverings, O diamonds!
I run; when, at my feet, are coupled (with their wounds
Of languor tasted in that pang of being twain)
These slumberers in just their arms at hazard lain;
Without unclasping them I lift them, and invade
This shrubbery, detested by the frivolous shade,
Of roses spending in the sun all fragrancy,
Where likewise in the day consumed may our sport be."*
Curse of the virgins, I adore thee, O delight
Ferocious of the naked burdens blest that fight
To shun my lip afire which, as a flash of lightning
Trembles, is drinking from the flesh the secret fright-
ening:

From the unkind one's feet to bosoms of the shy,
Who yields at once an innocence, all watery
With foolish tears or with less doleful vapoing.

*“My crime, it is that I, glad to be conquering
Those traitorous fears, divided the disbeveled heap
Of kisses, which the gods would well commingled keep;
For hardly had I tried to hide an ardent smile
Under the creases glad of one (holding the while
By a mere finger, so that thus her plummy white
Might color at her sister's passion now alight,
The little one naïve who never blushed at all:)
When from my arms, undone by deaths equivocal,
That prey of mine, forevermore ingrate, gets free,
Pitiless of the sob intoxicating me.”*

Well ! to the bliss by others shall I yet be led
With their hair knotted to the horns upon my
head:

Thou knowest, my passion, how, all purple and full
grown,

Each pomegranate bursts and with the bees makes
moan ;

And blood of ours, possessed by what it would ac-
quire,

Flows for the whole eternal swarm of the desire.

Now when this wood with gold and cinders is illuminated,

A festival is raised among the leaves consumed.

Etna! it is in thee by Venus visited

With her ingenuous heels posed on thy lava bed,

When rumbles a sleep unhappy or fades away the glow.

I hold the queen!

O certain castigation.

No,

But empty of words the spirit and this body aswoon

At last surrender to the haughty hush of noon:

Sleep now in the oblivion of the blasphemy,

Stretched on the thirsty sand and as I love to be

Mouth open to the potent wine-star!

Couple, adieu;

I am to see the shadow into which ye grew.

FIFTH CANTO OF THE INFERNO

FIFTH CANTO

THUS I descended from the primal zone
Down to the second, which less space embraces,
And so much greater pain as stings to moan.

There Minos stands and horribly grimaces;
Inspects the sins about the entrancy,
Judges, and as he girds himself he places.

I say that when the soul born evilly
Comes in his presence, it confesses all;
And that appraiser of iniquity

Discerns for it the hell proportional;
He girds his tail as many times about
As the degrees that he will have it fall.

Always before him stands a mighty rout;
They go, each in its turn, for the decree;
They speak, they hear, and then they are cast out.

“O thou who nearest the dolorous hostelry,”
To me, when he beheld me, Minos cried,
Quitting the act of that great ministry,

“ Look how thou enter, and in whom confide;
Deceive thee not the wideness of the gate.”
And my guide answered : “ Why dost thou too chide ?

“ Do not impede his course predestinate.
Thus is it willed where is the potency
For what is willed ; and make no more debate.”

Straightway begin the notes of misery
To make themselves be heard ; straightway I come
Where much lamenting makes assault on me.

I reached a region of all radiance dumb,
Which howls like ocean in a hurricane,
When it is fought by winds grown quarrelsome.

The hellish tempest, which will never wane,
Impels the spirits with its violence ;
Whirling and buffeting, it makes their pain.

When they approach the broken eminence,
There are the shrieks, the plaint, the lamentation ;
There they blaspheme at God's omnipotence.

I learned that into such a castigation
The evil users of the flesh are cast,
Who reason subjugate to inclination.

And as their wings do bear the starlings past,
In the cold season, in a great dense pack,
So bears the spirits maledight that blast.

It bears them up and down, and out and back;
There is no hope to comfort them for aye,
Not of repose, but even of lesser wrack.

And as the cranes go chanting forth their lay,
Forming themselves in air in a long trail,
So I beheld those spirits, on that fray

Of winds borne up, approach with sounds of wail;
Whereat I questioned: "Master, who are these
Folk whom the murky air doth so assail?"

"The first of those about whose histories
Thou longest to know," he answered thereupon,
"The empress was of many languages.

"With vice of luxury she was so undone,
Illicit she made licit by decree,
To take the blame in which she had been drawn.

"She is Semiramis, and we read that she
Succeeded Nimus and had been his spouse;
She used to have the Soldan's empery.

“The next is she who broke for love her vows
Unto Sichæus’ dust and took her life;
Then Cleopatra the luxurious.

“See Helena, for whom an age so rife
With wrongs revolved; and see Achilles grand,
Who with his love at last fell into strife;

“See Paris, Tristan”; and with pointing hand
He showed and named a thousand shades and more,
Whom love had out of our existence banned.

When I had listened to my counsellor
Naming so many an olden dame and knight,
I was bewildered with the grief I bore.

And I began : “ Poet, would that I might
Speak with that couple who together fly,
And seem upon the wind to be so light.”

And he to me : “Thou ’lt see when they be by
Us closer, and to them do thou then pray
By love which leads them, and they will draw nigh.”

Soon as to us the tempest makes them sway,
I raised my voice : “ O spirits wearied,
Come speak with us, if no one doth gainsay.”

As doves that are by love solicited,
Toward the sweet nest with wings held still and high,
Come through the air by their volition sped,

So these withdrew from Dido's company,
Towards us approaching through the air malign,
Such was the force of my affectionate cry.

"O living creature, gracious and benign,
Who through the purple air goest visiting
Us who with blood made earth incarnadine,

"Were friend of ours the Universal King,
To him would we be praying for thy peace,
Since thou dost pity our perverse suffering.

"Of what to hear and what to say thou please,
That will we hear and say to both of you,
The while, as now, the wind relinquishes.

"There sits the city wherewithin I grew
Upon the shore to which descends the Po,
To be at peace with all his retinue.

"Love, which in gentle hearts is soon aglow,
Caught him with the fair body of which I be
Bereft, and still for me the way works woe.

“Love, which from loving leaves no loved one free,
Caught me with the so great delight therefrom,
Not yet, thou seest, does it abandon me.

“Love led us onward to a single doom ;
For him who slew us doth Caina wait.”
Away from them to us did these words come.

When I had heard those spirits desolate,
I bowed my head, and bowed I let it be
Till the seer said: “What dost thou meditate?”

When I made answer I began : “Ah, me !
How many tender thoughts, how great a yearning
Led these unto the pass of misery !”

And once again I spake, and toward them turning,
Began: “Francesca, this thy mortifying
Moves me to tears with pity and with mourning.

“But tell me: at the time of the sweet sighing,
What way and at what sign did love dispose
That ye should know the longings mystifying?”

And she to me: “There are no greater woes
Than the remembrances of happy days
In misery; and this thy teacher knows.

“ But since to learn about the earliest ways
Of this our love thou hast a wish so dear,
I will do even as one who weeps and says.

“ Upon a day we read for our good cheer
Of Lancelot, how love held him in thrall;
We were alone and without any fear.

“ That reading urged at many an interval
Our eyes together and paled the cheeks of us;
But it was just one moment made us fall.

“ When we had read how one so amorous
Had kissed the smile that he was longing for,
This one, who always must be by me thus,

Kissed me upon the mouth, trembling all o'er;
Galeot the book, and he 't was written by !
Upon that day we read in it no more.”

So sorely did the other spirit cry,
While the one spake, that for the very dread
I swooned as if I were about to die,

And I fell down even as a man falls dead.

NOTE TO "THE AFTERNOON OF A FAUN"

WHAT is the sense of "L'Après-midi d'un Faune," a masterpiece that is almost popular — in so far as it is known as the poem by Mallarmé — as a "miracle of obscurity"? The better known music which interprets the poem for Debussy and the dance which interprets it for Nijinsky are independent works of art; and the critical interpretations of Gosse and Rémy de Gourmont are certainly either groping or a little superficial. The obvious love-story which seems to be what they see in "L'Après-midi d'un Faune" is in reality a philosophic allegory. "L'Après-midi d'un Faune" is one of the great dream-fictions, the greatest of which is the *Divina Commedia*. It is a dream within a day-dream — a sort of solipsistic drama in which the dreams are the symbols which the dreamer has invented for his desires, and which he strives by all the human means of logic, art, and action to endow with actual existence.

The faun, the solitary dreamer, is a compound of sensuality and imagination; and he is so divided by his double nature that, both in the long soliloquy which he dramatises by addressing himself and replying to himself and in the pathetic fallacy of the act with which the drama culminates, he mistakes himself for two. And the doubleness which he finds in himself he finds in that compound of the actual and the illusory which is his world. It is not the poem, however

difficult it may be, which is obscure. The poem is a clear picture, always coherent and precise, of a mind humanly obscure to itself in the presence of the natural confusion. The remarkable duplicity with which almost every word in the poem is made to express a double meaning is an index to the ingenuity of such a mind in its attempt to reconcile the inherent contradictions.

When in the first words of the poem the faun exclaims:—

“Those nymphs, I would perpetuate them,”

he is half awakened—as I think—from a dream which he is still mistaking for the reality, so undisturbing is the transition from the brilliant dream itself of rosy nudities to the sun and roses of his Sicilian solitude. In a moment, however, as the nymphs who have already excited his passion seem to be melting away, his waking certainly is troubled by a doubt. Were they real or a dream or a waking hallucination due to physical desire? They were not a dream—as he argues, naïve in his error—since he imagines now that he had simply mistaken for his victims the flesh-colored roses in the wood. And they were not an hypnagogic hallucination—as he naïvely continues to argue—for the simple reason that as he plays upon his flute he is completely engrossed in the pure inspiration of his music.

Baffled in his attempt to understand the true nature of the nymphs who have now disappeared, the faun, with a sort of hedonistic scepticism, resigns himself to his memories of the wonderful experience as the only truth available.

Invoking to his aid the quiet swamp where grow the rushes from which he makes his pipes, he remembers — his memories are recorded throughout the poem in the italicised passages — how, as he was tuning up, he startled into flight a group of nymphs whom he at first mistook for swans; how he spied on them as they bathed in the stream; and how, as he followed them again, he came upon two who were clasped together in amorous sleep; how he carried them off into a thicket of roses; how he delighted in their struggles; and how, just as he was kissing one and holding the other by a finger which was not, perhaps, so simple as he says, they finally escaped, leaving him still unsatisfied.

This record of his memories the faun interrupts from time to time by a running commentary in which he determines that the only trace of the vanished nymphs — since they have left no trace in the environment — is the invisible wound in his breast. The pain which they have left behind he immediately attempts to assuage by diverting it into music. The diversion, however, is in the end unsatisfying; and throwing away his useless instrument, he attempts by poetising to inflate the remembered past into a sort of fallacious present, which is indeed the essence of the descriptive arts. But in spite of all ingenious use of memory and imagination the departure of the nymphs leaves him still unsatisfied; nothing imaginative can satisfactorily substitute the reality; and under the domination of his growing passion, he attempts to realize his dream by action. Deceived by the remarkable vagary about Etna into a belief that he has

actual possession of Venus, he is betrayed into an act which brings with it the final disillusion. From the tragic self-defeat of that high dream of perpetuating nymphs there is now no refuge but sleep — a drunken sleep in which he may lose himself completely.

When the faun, as he accordingly falls asleep, exclaims at the end of the poem :—

“Couple, adieu ;

I go to see the shadow into which ye grew,” —

it is noon, and the attempt which he has made throughout the morning to perpetuate the dream of the preceding night is finally abandoned. “The Afternoon of a Faun” is the afternoon of sleep which follows — the afternoon which is never mentioned in the text and which is only for a moment foreshadowed as “the oblivion of the blasphemy.” It is as if the poem began as it is ending. The words advance as far as the threshold of unconsciousness. “The rest is silence” — a silence in which the dreamer and the dream, after the essential separation, are reconciled at last in a common extinction.

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